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Crime Drop in Venezuela Does Not Prove Trump's Claim the Country Is Sending Criminals to U.S.

By Robert Farley and Catalina Jaramillo

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THIS ARTICLE IS AVAILABLE IN BOTH ENGLISH AND ESPAÑOL

English ▾



Para leer en español, vea [esta traducción](#) de El Tiempo Latino.

Anyone who has heard a speech by former President Donald Trump in the last few years has certainly heard his unsubstantiated claim that countries around the world are emptying their prisons and mental institutions and sending those people to the U.S.

Trump has offered scant support for this claim, but in virtually all of his recent speeches, he has been citing a reported drop in crime in Venezuela as evidence that the economically and politically beleaguered country is sending its criminals to the U.S.

Experts in and out of Venezuela told us there is no evidence to back up Trump's claim. Reported crime is trending down in Venezuela — though not nearly as dramatically as Trump claims — but crime experts in the country say there are numerous reasons for that and they have nothing to do with sending criminals to the U.S.

Nonetheless, it's hard to prove a negative, and those who follow Venezuelan politics say such a tactic is not beyond Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, who has been in power since 2013 and is seeking another six-year term. The FBI [acknowledges](#) some Venezuelan criminals have migrated to the U.S., but there's no indication they were purposefully released from prison to come to this country.

When Trump makes such an explosive and sweeping claim — and makes it a hallmark of his case to return to office — the onus is on him to provide evidence. He hasn't. (His press office did not respond to our inquiries about it.) And the argument that Venezuelan crime is down is not the proof Trump suggests it is.

Trump's Claim

In recent speeches, Trump has sometimes said that crime is down “a staggering 67%” in Venezuela, while at other times he has put the drop in crime at “72% in a year.”

But in each case, as he did in [a video](#) posted to social media on June 4, he cited the statistics to support his claim, “They're taking their drug dealers and their people in jail, lots of people in jail, they're taking their murderers, their killers, they're taking them all and they're sending them into the United States.”

“Venezuela was crime ridden,” Trump said in [remarks](#) on May 31 after his [conviction](#) in the hush money case. “Caracas, their cities, crime ridden two years ago, three years ago. They just reported a 72% drop in crime in the last year because all of their criminals, most of them, and the rest are coming in now, the ones that didn't come in. In Venezuela, their prisons have been emptied into the United States. Their criminals and drug dealers have been taken out of the cities and brought into the United States, and that's true with many other countries.”

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In this report, we'll focus on Venezuela because that's the country most often cited by Trump.

Carlos Nieto of the Venezuelan nongovernmental organization [A Window to Freedom](#) is, of course, well aware of Trump's relentless insistence that Venezuelan officials have been systematically emptying their prisons and mental institutions and sending those people to the U.S.

Nieto, whose group has been monitoring the prison situation in Venezuela for more than 25 years, told us he has observed no evidence that supports Trump's claim. He added that there definitely is no official state policy to that effect.

Some criminals have emigrated from Venezuela, he told us in Spanish, and some have made their way to the U.S. But, he said, "there is nothing that can be affirmed that establishes that there is an agreement, or that the Venezuelan government is helping criminals leave Venezuela to go to the United States."

But neither can he rule out that it could be happening "under the hood."

"I do not doubt that it could be happening, nor do I doubt that it can be done," Nieto said. "I mean, these people, I'm talking about Maduro and his clique, are capable of that and many more things."

But that's pure speculation. And again, Nieto and other experts say they have seen no evidence of it.

Venezuelan Crime Stats

Reliable crime statistics in Venezuela are notoriously difficult to obtain. The government hasn't provided dependable crime reports in many years, Mike LaSusa, deputy director of content at InSight Crime, a think tank focused on crime and security in the Americas, told us via email.

Although Venezuelan security officials in May [reported](#) a 25% drop in crime this year compared with the same period in 2023, "the absence of official reports makes it impossible to verify the data," [LaSusa said](#) in a May 28 report.

In the absence of reliable government reporting, media and nongovernmental organizations have become the most trusted sources for documenting and tracking crime, LaSusa said.

One such NGO, the independent Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, in December [reported](#) a 25% decrease in violent deaths between 2022 and 2023. (Violent deaths include homicides, deaths by police intervention and suspected violent deaths under investigation.) That drop was [widely reported](#) in U.S. media. If Trump is citing the murder tally as a proxy for overall crime, he is vastly overstating the one-year drop.

But the number of violent deaths has been declining for years in Venezuela, according to the group's tallies, and is nearly 70% lower than it was in 2018, according to Roberto Briceño-León, the founder and director of the OVV (the acronym for Venezuelan Observatory of Violence in Spanish). That corresponds with Trump's figure, but, of course, that is a much longer time frame that predates the Biden administration.

LaSusa said the OVV's murder rate estimates track with InSight's observation about "a reduction in the intensity of criminal violence in certain areas of the country." But, he said, InSight has not seen a reduction in crime of 67% in a year, as Trump claimed.

"Additionally, the reductions that we have observed seem to respond largely to changes in criminal dynamics, rather than the effectiveness of the government's security policies," LaSusa said. "Basically, criminal groups seem to be seeking new opportunities outside of Venezuela due to the lack of opportunities in the country."

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What's Driving the Crime Drop?

In its [Annual Report on Violence 2023](#), OVV documented 6,973 violent deaths in 2023, about 14% of which resulted from police enforcement. That's down from 9,447 and 9,367 in 2021 and 2022, respectively. That's a decline of 26% in the reported number of violent deaths between 2021 and 2023.

While the violent death rate may have dropped, a national survey conducted by OVV in mid-2023 found that about 78% of residents believed crime had stayed the same or gotten worse.

Briceño-León shared with us via email in Spanish some of the causes OVV identified for the drop in murders — none of which includes a government program to ship convicts to the U.S.

"We have no evidence that the Venezuelan government is emptying the prisons or mental hospitals to send them out of the country, whether to the USA or any other country," Briceño-León said.

Rather, he said, the drop in crime is due to worsening economic and living conditions in the country, which has led to a massive out-migration of nearly [8 million](#) people since 2014.

"Crime is reduced in Venezuela due to a reduction in crime opportunities: bank robberies disappear because there is no money to steal; kidnappings are reduced because there is no cash to pay ransoms; robberies on public transportation cease because travelers have no money in their pockets and old, worthless cell phones; and assaults on bank money dispensers disappear because the cash they can give to their clients has not exceeded twenty U.S. dollars," Briceño-León said.

There has also been a consolidation of gang activity, which has led to a reduction in crime. In its report, OVV wrote that the drop in crime "can be attributed to the reduction of disorganized criminal activities and the growing concentration and monopolization of violence by powerful criminal organizations. These criminal organizations are now focusing on specific niches of criminal opportunities, which has led to a decreased overall level of violence in the country."

"The decrease in 'disorganized' violence, which causes high lethality, has been reduced by the notable emigration of young people and the loss of opportunities for crime," the report stated. "In recent years, there has been a reduction in the lethality of violence in certain parts of the country. This trend has been attributed to agreements made between criminal gangs regarding the distribution of tasks during business operations, as well as the demarcation of areas of operation, which has allowed for their expansion and consolidation. However, in municipalities where there are no such agreements or where criminal control has not been fully established, violent events continue to occur."

The consolidation of organized crime has led to "a kind of mafia peace" in areas they control, Ronna Rísquez, a Venezuelan investigative journalist, told us in Spanish.

The "humanitarian emergency" in Venezuela has also had implications for criminals as well. Venezuela, she said, "stopped being attractive for crime, because it no longer made sense to kidnap ... It made no sense to steal, because everyone was poor. In Venezuela ... no one had money, people were starving and then for crime, for criminals, it was no longer profitable to have criminal activities."

Rísquez said another reason for the decrease in crime is that Venezuelan authorities, sometime between 2015 and 2021, began "a large number of alleged extrajudicial executions" of people accused of belonging to criminal groups.

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The OVV report notes that some criminals have also left Venezuela “seeking to continue their criminal life in other places where they find greater opportunities for profit,” Briceño-León said. But, he said, the vast majority of emigrants from Venezuela are “honest workers fleeing the country’s poverty, looking for a job and a better future.”

The [vast majority](#) of those fleeing Venezuela have settled in nearby South American countries. But more and more are making their way to the U.S. Prior to President Joe Biden taking office, [relatively few](#) Venezuelan emigrants were intercepted by U.S. Border Patrol. For most of the 2010s, less than 100 Venezuelans a year were caught trying to cross the southwest border illegally. The number grew to more than 2,000 in fiscal year 2019. But beginning in 2021 the numbers [began to swell](#), and topped 187,000 and 200,000 in the 2022 and 2023 fiscal years, respectively.



A Venezuelan asylum seeker carries his daughter before they cross the Rio Grande into Brownsville, Texas, in December 2022. The U.S. has seen a surge of migrants from Venezuela since 2021. Photo by Veronica G. Cardenas/ AFP via Getty Images.

As of January, the U.S. had the [third-largest](#) number of Venezuelan emigrants in the world (545,000) — though Colombia remained by far the largest destination (2.9 million), followed by Peru (1.5 million). Brazil, Ecuador, Chile and Spain each had roughly the same number as the U.S.

Criminal groups with origins in Venezuela have quickly spread to neighboring South American countries where most Venezuelans have settled. According to a U.S. State Department [trafficking report](#) for Colombia released in 2023, “El Tren de Aragua — Venezuela’s most powerful criminal gang — and the National Liberation Army (ELN) operate sex trafficking networks in the border town of Villa del Rosario in the Norte de Santander department. These groups exploit Venezuelan migrants and internally

displaced Colombians in sex trafficking and take advantage of economic vulnerabilities and subject them to debt bondage.”

And some criminals from Venezuela have come to the U.S.

Nieto, of the Venezuelan nongovernmental organization A Window to Freedom, attributed the decrease in crimes to the mass emigration from the country in recent years, a number, he said, that “undoubtedly does not exclude criminals.”

There is some evidence Tren de Aragua gang members have also made their way to the U.S. The U.S. Border Patrol [told CNN en Español](#) that 38 potential members of Tren de Aragua were arrested at the border between October 2022 and October 2023.

On April 5, U.S. Border Patrol Chief Jason Owens [posted](#) on social media to “[w]atch out for this gang. It is the most powerful in Venezuela, known for murder, drug trafficking, sex crimes, extortion, & other violent acts.”

And suspected members of the Venezuelan gang have been linked to a number of crimes in the U.S., including [the murder](#) of a former Venezuelan police officer in Miami in November, and a spate of [cell phone robberies](#) in New York City.

In March, Sen. Marco Rubio and Rep. María Elvira Salazar [led](#) a group of 23 federal legislators petitioning Biden to formally designate Tren de Aragua as a transnational criminal organization, which would allow the U.S. to freeze assets its members have in the U.S. In a Senate subcommittee [hearing](#) on April 11, Chris Landberg, deputy assistant

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Rísquez, author of “[The Aragua Train: The gang that revolutionized organized crime in Latin America](#),” said that while some criminals are inevitably among those who have emigrated from Venezuela to the U.S., “There is no element, no evidence, nothing that indicates that in Venezuela prisoners are being released to leave or to be sent to the United States to commit crimes. There is no plan from the Venezuelan government that points toward that.”

Prison Releases

Complicating the issue is that Venezuela has, in fact, been actively trying to reduce its prison population.

Venezuela has been seeking to address [severe overcrowding](#) in its preventive detention centers, which were only designed to hold inmates for 48 hours but have become the de facto prisons of the country, Nieto said.

In March, the Presidential Commission for Judicial Revolution [announced](#) the release of 100 inmates from such a facility as part of [a directive](#) issued by Maduro to evaluate the preventive detention facilities and address overcrowding.

Preventive detention centers were designed to be temporary holding cells for people awaiting a court date. But that’s not what they became, Nieto said.

“The Ministry for the Penitentiary Service many years ago gave the order not to allow the entry of new people [to the traditional prisons] if they did not authorize it,” Nieto said. “This ministry prohibited the entry of new inmates into Venezuelan prisons, which is where they should be. This caused the preventive care centers to collapse and the preventive care centers to become, as they are today, the new prisons of Venezuela.”

Nieto estimates there are as many as 70,000 people held in these preventive care centers, far greater than they were designed to house.

In response, the government created two commissions to review the cases of prisoners and to determine if they should be “granted freedom,” Nieto said. “In fact, there are many who have been released.”

While some in the U.S. have claimed the Venezuelan government is releasing its most violent criminals, the Venezuelan government doesn’t disclose the charges against those released, so there’s no way of knowing, he said.

“Look, people are released, first, in many cases because they have been detained there for several years and a trial has not even been initiated against them,” Nieto said. “Also because in many cases they are minor crimes that do not merit such heavy penalties. So, well, that frees people. There are cases [of those] that have even already served the sentence established at that time.”

In addition, the Venezuelan government under Maduro has attempted recently to militarily [regain control](#) of traditional prisons, whose operation had previously been ceded to criminal groups. The leader of the Tren de Aragua gang, Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, and [hundreds of others](#) escaped from the prison where the gang originated shortly before the prison was raided by government authorities in September, [CNN en Español](#) reported. He [remains](#) at large, and [InSight reported](#) that it is believed he is being protected by criminal associates in a mining town in Venezuela near the border with Guyana.

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According to the [World Prison Brief](#) website maintained by [Helen Fair](#) of the Institute for Crime and Justice Police Research, Venezuela's prison population (not including pre-trial detainees) declined from 37,543 in 2020 to 32,200 in 2022 (and had been declining for the four years before that as well).

The government's efforts to retake control of the prisons "has involved relocating some prisoners from one prison to another, and there are some prisoners who are unaccounted for," LaSusa, of InSight, said. "However, the Venezuelan government has no known policy of selecting particular inmates to send them outside the country."

Speculation

Again, Trump has provided no evidence to back up his claim that the Venezuelan government is emptying its prisons and sending inmates to the U.S.

Some supporters of Trump's immigration policy say that, while perhaps speculative, there is good reason to believe Trump *may* be right.

Andrew Arthur of the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates lower immigration, wrote a [column](#) noting that Cuba did something like that in the 1980s, and he argued that since there are ideological and political ties between Cuba and Venezuela, "the idea may not be as specious as some have claimed."

In 1980, Cuban leader Fidel Castro allowed the mass migration of some 125,000 Cubans to the U.S. in what was known as the [Mariel boatlift](#).

"Most were true refugees, many had families here, and the great majority has settled into American communities without mishap," the [Washington Post](#) wrote in 1983. "But the Cuban dictator played a cruel joke. He opened his jails and mental hospitals and put their inmates on the boats too."

According to the Post, about 22,000 of the new arrivals "freely admitted that they were convicts." Some were political prisoners, but others were convicts who had committed serious felonies, including violent crimes.

Arthur pointed to a drop in Venezuelan crime, the close alignment between the Cuban and Venezuelan governments, and anecdotal evidence of Venezuelans committing crimes in the U.S.

"None of this is evidence of anything," Arthur told us, but "all of this does raise some questions."

But the bar is higher than that for such a definitive and repeated claim by Trump, and numerous officials say they have seen no evidence to support Trump's claim. (Not to mention the fact that Trump claims the emptying of prisons and mental institutions is happening "with many other countries.")

"This claim has come up repeatedly about various countries, Venezuela is just the latest example," [Julia Gelatt](#), associate director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Program at the Migration Policy Institute, told us. "While the actions of institutions in Venezuela is not our specialty, we are unaware of any action by Venezuelan authorities (or those of any other country) to empty its jails and prisons or its mental-health institutions to send criminals or people with mental-health issues to the U.S."

"They are neither emptying the prisons nor the mental shelters to send people to the United States, nor is the reduction in crime associated with [Trump's claim]," Rísquez, the Venezuelan investigative journalist, told us. "Those statements by former President Trump, it seems to me that they have no basis, that they are political, that they have to do with, well, some intention to criminalize migration or the processes that are occurring in the United States with migrants."

In an [interview](#) with CBS News in March, Owens, the U.S. Border Patrol chief, was asked if it

“They are neither emptying the prisons nor the mental shelters to send people to the United States, nor is the reduction in crime associated with [Trump’s claim],” Rusque, the Venezuelan investigative journalist, told us. “Those statements by former President Trump, it seems to me that they have no basis, that they are political, that they have to do with, well, some intention to criminalize migration or the processes that are occurring in the United States with migrants.”

In an [interview](#) with CBS News in March, Owens, the U.S. Border Patrol chief, was asked if it was accurate — as Trump has said — that “we have millions and millions of people coming from jails and prisons.”

“I don’t know,” Owens said. “I don’t know if other countries are releasing people from jails and those folks that got released are making their way up, or not, I don’t know what the numbers would be. It’s the unknown that scares us. I can tell you that there are at least 140,000 that we know about that have gotten away [\[since October\]](#), that we have detected but have not been able to apprehend. And I know there’s a good likelihood that there’s plenty more that we have not detected that also got away. Is it possible that at least a portion of them come from violent criminal backgrounds or served time in prison in other countries? Absolutely.”

But among the large number of Venezuelan migrants who are crossing illegally into the U.S. and then seeking asylum status, “I think they absolutely are by and large good people,” Owens said.

Nonetheless, he said, there is “a very small amount” among those apprehended that have criminal backgrounds, including “convicted sexual predators” and “convicted gang members.” Owens said it is only logical that there is a “higher incidence” of criminals among the so-called gotaways, because they are afraid to turn themselves in for CBP scrutiny.

“Most of the folks who we’re encountering that are turning themselves in, they’re coming across because they’re either fleeing terrible conditions or they’re economic migrants looking for a better way of life,” Owens said. “It doesn’t make them bad people. It’s just that they’re not being respectful of the laws that we’ve established as a country and they’re actually putting people in this country in harm’s way because they’re pulling the border security apparatus off of task.”

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